



Chernobyl Can Happen Here

By Paul Gunter and Linda Gunter

Last month, the 19th anniversary of the Chernobyl atomic reactor disaster in Ukraine slipped by with scarcely a murmur in the media. Instead, headlines were trumpeting the new nuclear “renaissance,” as the Bush administration flaunts its pork-laden energy bill and the industry crows about “clean, green, nuclear power.”

In attempting to muscle its way into the climate change argument, with a barrage of misinformation and flawed statistics, the nuclear industry is conveniently ducking the very real horrors that would ensue if one of their reactors suffered an accident or attack resulting in a release to the environment of its radioactive contents. And the weight of scientific evidence suggests such an outcome is not only possible but probable.

Since 9/11 the security landscape has changed forever. We know that an attack on a U.S. reactor was in the original al Qaeda plans and likely will be again. The 103 operating U.S. reactors are all now reaching the end of their life spans, meaning they are more prone to technical problems that could lead to accident. And despite their geriatric status, older reactors are subject to fewer safety checks and are run hotter and longer, leading to cracking and embrittled parts vulnerable to failure.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), congressionally charged with safeguarding the public, has instead capitulated to the industry’s profit-margin priorities.

Added to that, older reactors contain radiation inventories far larger than the infant reactor at Chernobyl that had operated just 2 years before the catastrophe. And of course both the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island accidents were a result of human error, the one wild card that can never be entirely eliminated.

Also forgotten amidst the Washington pundits’ pro-nuclear pronouncements are the

tragic consequences so vividly seen today in the children of Chernobyl. These are young lives forever altered by the birth defects they inherited from their parents who had the misfortune to live close to the reactor or downwind of its toxic fallout cloud. Many have been abandoned in orphanages.

More than seven million people in the former Soviet Republics of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine are believed to have suffered medical problems and genetic damage as the direct result of Chernobyl.

In Ukraine alone, more than 2.32 million people, including 452,000 children have been treated for radiation-linked illnesses, including thyroid and blood cancers and cancerous growths according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Health.

New findings reported last November in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health published by the British Medical Association concluded that more than 800 cancers in Sweden are being attributed to the ever-widening impact of the “Chernobyl-effect.”

It is increasingly disingenuous of the nuclear industry to distance itself from a potential catastrophic accident in the United States. Considerable evidence exists that currently operating U.S. reactor containments can also fail during a severe accident. A 1990 U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) study of risks associated with severe reactor accidents concluded that none of the five different US designs it analyzed were capable of remaining intact during all severe accident scenarios.

Furthermore, a terrorist attack on just a single U.S. nuclear plant could deliver the unimaginable. One study that examined such a catastrophe at the Indian Point nuclear plant just 25 miles from Manhattan, concluded that the number of near-term deaths within 50 miles, due to lethal radiation exposures received within seven days after an attack by a large aircraft would number approximately 44,000 under worst case scenario weather conditions. Long-term cancer deaths could soar as high as 500,000. Manhattan would become a near-permanent sacrifice zone.

The recently released National Academy of Sciences report on the vulnerability of reactor fuel pools supports these conclusions. According to the report, an attack on a fuel pool and the resulting fire “would create thermal plumes that could potentially transport radioactive aerosols hundreds of miles downwind under appropriate atmospheric conditions.”

Fortunately, Americans have a choice. We can reject the nuclear liability and tell our elected representatives to advocate for conservation, energy efficiency and renewable energy, measures that carry none of the dangers nor the toxic legacy of nuclear power. It's common sense. And our children's children will thank us.

